

On-Site Inventory Project

Henry Moses' Coup Stick

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Renton High School, though built in 1911 on Duwamish tribal land, did not have any Native American students, until 1916 when Henry Moses, the first "Indian" of Renton High School, enrolled. Through his time at RHS – 1916 through 1920 – he became an infamous basketball player as he was the only Indian on the team. Not only was he the only Indian, he was also one of the most competitive players in spite of the endless taunting he received by opposing teams due to his heritage. As a result of his and the team's success, the "Indians" was slowly adopted as the school's mascot, which had been "mascot-less" since its opening. Attempts have been made to change the mascot name, for reasons of cultural sensitivity; however, the school, the Duwamish Tribe, and Henry Moses' family have argued that the mascot honors the memory of Moses' time as a student.

As the last hereditary chief of the Duwamish Tribe, Henry Moses was deeply connected to his culture. Several cultural objects belonging to and created by Moses exist in the collection. As we were inventorying the collection, we came across one such object, a coup stick he made. What is a coup stick, you ask? Well, a coup stick relates to the practice of counting coup.

Counting coup refers to the winning of prestige in battle by the Plains Indians of North America. Warriors won prestige by acts of bravery in the face of the enemy, and these acts could be recorded in various ways and retold as stories. Any blow struck against the enemy counted as a coup, but the most prestigious acts included touching an enemy warrior with the hand, bow, or with a coup stick then escaping unharmed. Risk of injury or death was involved should the other warrior respond violently.



Reproduction of a coup stick from an unknown region.



Example of a Pacific NW coup stick. (Note the eagle feathers.)

The phrase counting coup can also refer to the recounting of stories about battle exploits. It can also involve stealing items from the enemy. The term is of French origin from the verb *couper*, which means literally to cut, hit or strike. The expression can be seen as referring to "counting strikes".

After a battle or exploit, the people of a tribe would gather together to recount their acts of bravery and "count coup." Coups were recorded by putting notches in a coup stick. Indians of the Pacific Northwest would tie an eagle feather to their coup stick for each coup counted, but many tribes did not follow this tradition.

Moses' coup stick (pictured below) is coup stick with a carved wooden handle. The base of the handle is wrapped in sueded leather that is attached with at least three metal nails. There is a leather loop attached to the end of the handle. The handle is carved with four designs: a whale, canoe, and two long geometric shapes. The shapes are painted with red, black, and green (the canoe has a red paddle painted on the side). The top of the stick has a large bird foot attached to it. There are four large claws on the foot. The foot is attached to the handle with a leather band that is secured with black string. There is a thin band of fuzzy white material at the top of the leather band just below the bird foot. It is relevant to note that Moses' coup stick was never used in battle; it is simply a powerful recreation.

Stay tuned for more discoveries from the collection!



Henry Moses' coup stick. (RHM# 1991.046.001)



Renton History Museum